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Honors English A2

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Living History Final

Lincoln’s Last Play

I sat staring at the green wall in front of me, which was cracked right down the middle. The building must have held together for many years – but, it had finally cracked from the pressure and the poor construction. This was only evident from behind the curtain, however. I peeked through the curtain and took in the beautifully constructed theatre where the audience sat. The seats went up three stories high, and above that were chandeliers giving off dim, elegant lighting, which outlined a path for couples in their finest attire who were pouring into the theatre. Off to the left side was the Presidential Box, proudly visible to the entire theatre and patriotically decorated with American flags. My stomach churned over the knowledge that the President of the United States would be watching me tonight. I know that he didn’t know me at all, and it wouldn’t really matter what he thought of me, but I was still terrified. I didn’t want to disappoint a man as great as President Lincoln, and, since he was an avid theatre-goer and a fan of Shakespeare – especially Hamlet – I didn’t want him to feel that the play we were performing would be too light for his sophisticated taste. “Our American Cousin” wasn’t really known for its depth.

I went back to staring at the cracked wall. My eyes traveled down to the cracks in the floor and then to the tunnels that led below the theatre, which were equally worn out and covered with rust. Who would have thought that a theatre that appears so well put together would have such a faulty foundation? To an audience member, the theatre appeared perfect and idyllic. But, to those who worked behind the scenes, it was clear that it was all merely a façade, and that the flaws were poorly hidden just below the surface.

I saw a figure lurking in the tunnels below the theatre. I almost didn’t notice him because of my nerves. I went closer to see who it was. It was very odd – no one ventures into the tunnels below the theatre. What could this person be doing? I moved even closer, trying not to get any dirt on my costume. I saw his face: it was John Wilkes Booth, one of the most well-known actors in town. Although I preferred his brother, Edwin Booth, I had admired John for quite some time. The whole Booth family was a magnificent group of actors. I had to admit, I was a bit star struck.

“Hello, there,” he said.

I looked around. Was he talking to me?

“You must be wondering why I’m in the tunnels.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me. I guess it was odd for him to be wandering under the theatre, but I assumed that because of his celebrity status, he was entitled to do whatever he pleased in the Ford Theatre.

“I have been trying to find my way up to the President’s Box. I’m very well acquainted with the Rathbones, who are the President’s guests tonight. I wanted to surprise them, but I assume they’ve already made their way up to the President’s box, which is locked. But, since I’ve worked so much in this theatre, I know that there is a back entrance through the dressing rooms. Would you be so kind as to let me into them?

“Absolutely,” I responded immediately. I took out a set of keys from my pockets and unlocked the dressing room door.

“I’m a big fan of your work, Mr. Booth,” I said, awkwardly.

“Oh, thank you, you’re too kind,” he responded, tritely, as if he received compliments too often.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Well, there is one thing. My horse is tied up a few blocks down, and I want to beat the rush out of the theatre; so I’m wondering if you can go get him for me and see if my friend, Spangler, who works just outside the theatre could hold it for me until after the show. I know you’re about to go on in a bit, but you have time. Shows start late every night, especially with the President out there schmoozing with all of his fellow Union supporters. It’s not like they’re going to start without you, you’re the leading role!”

He was right. I am the leading role, and once I enter, I never leave the stage. I have so much to be nervous about, and now I have to worry about pleasing my idol’s many requests. I had to stand up for myself, though. I mean, I’m an actor just as he is, and even though he is much more well-known than me, I have no reason to try to impress him. I have a show starting in ten minutes, for the President of the United States!

“I’m sorry, it’s pouring out there, and I don’t want to mess up my costume. You’ll just have to move him yourself.”

“All the more reason to move my horse, he hates the rain! Come on, a little rain never hurt anyone.…”

“Then it won’t hurt your horse, he’ll be just fine.”

“Here, take my jacket.”

“I really should be preparing right now.”

“Come on, do this for me. You know, you may be a good actor, but you won’t get anywhere unless you help a friend out.”

There was no use arguing with him; I had to acquiesce.

“What does your horse look like?”

“Oh, thank you so much. He’s grey, with a few dark patches near his head.”

I went quickly off into the stormy night. I was disappointed by Booth’s personality. Why couldn’t he move his own horse? Oh well, at least at gave me something to occupy my time so I wouldn’t have to focus on my nerves.

Two blocks later, I saw the horse. It was huge and menacing looking. “What am I going to do with this?” I thought. I had never handled a horse before; in fact, I’m quite afraid of them. I untied the horse from the rail and began to try and pull it toward the theatre. The horse was stubborn, and it took a lot of effort to drag it back. There I stood, five minutes before a performance, dragging a horse with all my might, sopping wet, fearing that the animal was going to stomp on me.

It’s a pretty glamorous life being an actor, isn’t it?

After all that, I found a man standing outside the theatre.

“Are you Spangler?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Can you hold this horse for John Wilkes Booth?”

“What’s he doing here?”

“I don’t know, watching the show, I guess. I think he’s here to see the Rathbones.”

“The Rathbones are the President’s guests.”

“I know, I think he’s going to surprise them.”

“John doesn’t even know the Rathbones, does he?”

“Well, he has to.”

“Alright, if you say so.”

It did seem a little strange, now that I thought about it. But, my thought was interrupted by the Stage Manager pulling me aside and saying, “Where were you? The show’s starting any minute! Oh, God, you’re soaked!”

She called for some assistants to dry me off and make me look presentable.

“The President’s here, you know! Don’t you care?”

I did care, very much. Her comment lacked any understanding of my situation. But, before I could defend myself, I was rushed onstage.

I was extremely nervous, now. The house was absolutely packed, and the theatre seemed so deep I couldn’t even see the back wall. The lights were bright, blinding, and hot. My eyes shifted to the left. There was the President, looking exactly as I imagined him, his height towering over the others, even while sitting down. Sitting next to him was his wife, Mary Todd, and then the Rathbones. There was no sign of Booth. I guess he must have just said hello to the Rathbones and rushed off to his own seat.

I heard laughter as I said my lines. Then, I heard more and more laughter from the audience, which began to fill me with relief and calm my nerves. I was especially pleased to see the President laughing. With the reassurance that the audience members were enjoying themselves, the show went very smoothly for some time. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure wandering around on the second balcony. It was Booth! He seemed completely lost and out of place. I had thought he would have taken a seat and be watching the show. He stood there for a moment and then he rushed off.

The show continued to go very well, and I delivered the line (which I knew the audience would find very funny), “Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal — you sockdologizing old man-trap!”

The audience roared in laughter. Under the laughter, I heard some sort of loud noise. The audience appeared to ignore it and continued laughing. Shortly after that, I heard a loud scream coming from the President’s box. Abraham Lincoln was not laughing, He was hunched over in his seat, with Mary Todd next to him, screaming! Something had gone horribly wrong, but the audience was still caught up in the moment of the play, laughing louder than I had ever heard! Then, I saw Booth in the President’s box, trying to stab Mr. Rathbone! Friends with the Rathbones, he said? Well, I guess he “surprised” him, just as he said he would. Rathbone put up a hard fight with Booth, and then Booth fell out of the President’s Box and onto the stage, getting his leg tangled in the President’s flag. And I couldn’t believe it; the audience roared with laughter again, obviously thinking this was part of the show! Boot landed with a thud, and hobbled off, yelling “Sic Semper Tyranis!” The phrase seemed very familiar – I had heard confederate supporters saying it before, yet I had never understood what it meant.

I tried to run after Booth, and so did others who realized that Booth had done something terrible to the President. He ran into the wings, with us chasing him every step of the way. A stagehand tried to grab him, but he broke free, and ran out the door. Booth hopped onto the horse Spangler had been holding for him, the same horse that I had given Spangler to hold, and rode off into the storm. I stood in the pouring rain watching him ride away. Others tried to chase him on horseback, but Booth had such a head start, and the storm was so dark, that it was hopeless. I couldn’t believe it! It all happened so fast that I could barely appreciate what had happened! One minute I was performing, and the audience members had been enjoying themselves, and the next minute the theatre was plunged into chaos, all because Booth had done something to the terrible to the President! I hoped that the President was alright.

As I stood amidst the screaming patrons – with Mary Todd’s scream being the loudest - a pang of guilt washed over me. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t made the connection! Booth had used me. I was just too distracted to realize what he was planning! I should have been more suspicious when Booth had asked me to let him into the President’s box. Spangler had been right; Booth didn’t even know the Rathbones. He had used me to move his horse so he could make his quick escape.

The audience was now aware of what had happened and was in a complete panic. Some ran out of the building, fearing something terrible would happen to them, too. Some courageous ones tried (but failed) to chase after Booth. Others just stood there, in shock.

I heard a voice pleading, “Is there a doctor in the house?”

There were two doctors who responded to the President’s Box. I followed, and although I was absolutely horrified to see what had happened to President Lincoln, something within me couldn’t help it. I had to see what had happened.

As I climbed up to the president’s box, I kept telling myself that it was going to be alright, that the President was going to be just fine.

I walked into the box to see the carnage – it was a horrible sight. Lincoln hunched over in his chair was not the worst part; no, the worst part was Mary Todd’s weeping, and the Rathbones’ utter dismay, and the doctors’ panicked efforts, and the absolute chill in the air at the thought that anyone could have done this to the President. I held back – yet, I could not keep myself from staring.

“He has no pulse,” a doctor said. Mary’s sobs grew louder still and more intense. The thought had never even occurred to me... could Lincoln be...? I never thought, or at least didn’t want to think, that Booth could have ever killed Lincoln. I imagined families sitting at home, perfectly content, not realizing Abraham Lincoln, a household fixture might be dead. For just a few more moments, the country would still be perfectly normal, and then the news would spread, and...

I didn’t even want to think about it.

“He’s still breathing,” I heard. There is hope then! He is still alive; he just needs to be revived, by the doctors. I became more optimistic until I heard someone say, “How did Booth even get into the President’s Box?”

I looked down at the floor. Again guilt welled up inside of me, as I realized that none of this would have ever happened if I didn’t let Booth into the President’s Box. I thought about saying right then and there that I had done it, but I didn’t want them to get the wrong idea. I love this country, and I love President Lincoln. I would have never intentionally helped Booth. I couldn’t imagine how I would live with the fact if I didn’t tell anybody. But, then again, I couldn’t imagine that anybody would let me live with the fact if I did tell them.

I elected not to say anything. Instead, I just stared at President Lincoln’s face, which seemed to be void of any life whatsoever. It was at that moment when I knew that Lincoln had no hope of living. It was unfathomable to think that in that one moment of the shooting, every thought, every movement, every breath and observation had disappeared. A man who was so influential, a man whose brain had ended slavery and won the Civil War, affecting the lives of every single American, now had a bullet in it – and I was the person who was at fault.

If I hadn’t let Booth into the President’s Box, I would still have been performing the play, having a wonderful night. And the President would be sitting there, watching me and enjoying himself.

Booth had used me like a chess piece. I was a pawn in his game of chess. I couldn’t believe that I had ever looked up to him and saw him as my idol. I guess when you grow up seeing somebody onstage and in the newspaper; you don’t really know who they are.

Someone suggested that they carry President Lincoln back to the white house, and those around him unanimously agreed. He would then have a more dignified death. They began to leave, carrying the body. The theatre was clearing out; most people didn’t want to stick around and watch this horrible scene. They probably went to tell their friends, spouses, and children, spreading the news like a virus that would infect the lives of every American.

I didn’t want to leave. I headed back towards the stage, thinking about the lines I would be saying if nothing had happened that night, desperately wishing things were back to where they were before. I figured that it was foolish to blame myself for the whole occurrence. After all, if I hadn’t, some other person would have let Booth into the President’s Box. Then again, somebody else didn’t. I felt like I was the one who started the chain of events that led up to Lincoln’s Assassination. And I couldn’t forgive myself for that.

Twelve days later, the guilt had hardly subsided. Twelve days of being unemployed, since further performances of “Our American Cousin” had been canceled indefinitely. In fact, they were talking about making the Ford Theatre into a memorial for President Lincoln, which I think would be rather nice. Even though my big break into the acting world had been cut short – my concern for myself was beside the point. Lincoln’s Presidency had been cut short, sending the country into a complete frenzy, just as I had anticipated. Andrew Johnson has taken over for him, and people aren’t very happy about it. It doesn’t seem like Reconstruction will go as smoothly as planned, and it will take a lot of time to get our country going again.

However, some justice has been done. I read in the paper this morning that Booth had been caught last night, trying to hide at a farmhouse. He was twenty-six years old, very young to make such a negative of an impact on the country. It is reported that before his death, he was shocked to see that news articles were condemning him, instead of praising him.

I realized then that it wasn’t I who set the ball rolling in this event: Booth would have found some other way to kill President Lincoln even if I hadn’t let him into the President’s Box, and he would have found some other way to make a quick escape without having me get his horse. He was so passionate about his misguided cause, that he wouldn’t have let anything so trivial as my refusal to do his bidding stop him.

Some people have it worse than I do, however. I heard that in President Lincoln’s final moments, the doctors had forced Mary Todd out of his room at the time of his death, because they deemed her to be “too disruptive” in her mourning.

Some say all things happen for a reason. However, I can’t see how this horrible act could have any logical reason. I just hope that our country will one day get out of this rough period; that I am able to go back to acting; and that the country will return to normal, again.